

The Proper Order of Things: Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Most of the folks in the parish know by now that we've been worshipping on the green space north of the parking lot each Wednesday night this summer. If you haven't had a chance to attend, you should really give it a whirl before the summer is over. There is something incredibly beautiful—and hopefully divine—about worshipping outside with the sun and grass and wind, with simple bread and wine and good company, singing without instruments and praying the ancient words of our faith.

What might not be so obvious to the worshippers is that, every Wednesday, about an hour before the service, the caretaker of our building, Skrauss, comes up to me and says, “well, should we set up the chairs outside or inside.” As the priest, this fateful decision rests on me. For several Wednesdays in a row, there has been a hint of rain in the air, and it's been hard to know if we should have Mass on the Grass, or Mass on the parquet floors in the Guild Hall.

This past Wednesday, the sky was gloomy, and the humidity was off the charts. I made the call, and I decided that, storm notwithstanding, we should worship outside. There was a great turn out for Mass on the Grass. Still, as we sat there, the dark clouds and the whipping wind made me wonder if I'd made a big mistake. I began to worry. And worry. And worry some more.

My friend and colleague, The Rev. John Hickey, was leading us through the liturgy—the familiar sequence of song, prayer, lesson, psalm, Gospel...and the wind really started to pick up. The cloth covering the altar was billowing like a sail; the breeze was stealing John's words. Clearly, I had made a terrible mistake.

The minutes passed by; our prayers continued, and I realized that, in spite of the whipping cloth and the dark clouds and the sprinkle of rain, we were going to sit for a time with Jesus. No matter the interference; we were going to sit with Jesus.

This morning, our Gospel story is the famous one that pits Mary against Martha. Should we have an active faith or a contemplative faith? I don't like this morning's Gospel very well. I've always resented it, because I am so clearly a Martha, and Martha kind of gets a scolding from Jesus. I tend to think it's all well and good for the disciples to sit and listen to the great teachings of Jesus, but someone needed to clean the house, buy the food, prepare it and get everyone fed—worry about the details. Mary was just sitting there at Jesus' feet. Why do we praise her for essentially doing nothing?

The thing is, we have no idea what she had to give up to sit, for those few moments, with God. Maybe her mind was preoccupied with a million tasks just like Martha's was, but she made herself stop and spend time with God. Maybe she was concerned with the well being of the disciples; maybe she had a family at home that took 110% of her time and energy. Maybe Mary was consumed by worrying about money and politics and the weather. We don't know. The story

doesn't say. But no matter what was on her mind that day, she made some time to sit with God—sitting at Jesus' feet learning, growing, being transformed.

The worry will always be there. There's always a storm on the horizon to take our attention away from those precious, holy moments when we sit with God. There will always be a tendency for us to focus on something other than God—and to worry about the things around us.

I really don't think that Jesus is saying that the work doesn't need to be done. Of course the work needs to be done. But it has to be grounded in something. The work has to be grounded in an intimacy with God and in the teachings of Jesus. These are the soul and center of the work that we do, and they must come first before we can begin addressing the needs of the world. We can't worry ourselves into a frenzy and then try to be the agents of change in this world. It will never work. Christianity goes the other way. We listen to the voice of God, are seen and known for who we are and THEN we get out there and do the work of the kingdom of heaven.

As I sat there on Wednesday evening, I thought, "will people get wet if it rains," "will they stop coming if the storm makes it uncomfortable," "will the table cloth or the stoles be ruined," "will the bread get soggy?"

None of that matters, of course. If the storm comes, we will deal with it. But if we try to deal with it before we have been in prayer, we will flounder. If we try to deal with it before we have been fed by the bread and the wine made holy by God, we will be blown off course.

I stopped worrying about the storm. It's not that I didn't recognize there was a legitimate possibility that we'd need to go inside. It was more that I let go of an attempt to control; I let go of my worry about whether the liturgy would be interrupted. I finally allowed myself to sit at the feet of Jesus, come what may. I acted, for a few minutes at least, like holy Mary.

I don't think that this story is one about the relative merits of a life of action vs. a life of contemplation. Instead, I think it has something to do with the order of things. We pray and come close to Christ. And then we can tackle anything this sometimes vicious world can throw at us.

And in fact, as this horrific summer has demonstrated, we have more to address than a few drops of rain. Not only do we need to sit at the feet of Jesus, we absolutely **MUST** sit at the feet of Jesus if we will find a way forward together. Stopping. Sitting. Listening. Being with God. These are what we must do before we act.

The proper order of things, I think, is Mary's secret. And the proper order of things is God's grace for us this morning. Amen.